

Waldorf Education in China



BY HARRY WONG AND TAMMY HUGHES
WITH RONALD E. KOETZSCH

Recently, Renewal received two reports on Waldorf Education in China. One was from Tammy Hughes, an American Waldorf teacher who has taught in the United States and New Zealand and who currently is living and teaching in China. The other was from Harry Wong, one of the founders of the Chengdu Waldorf School, the first Waldorf school in China. The following article is a conflation of those two reports. Since today one human being out of five lives in China and that nation has become a major economic, political, and cultural force in the world, what is happening there in education is of immense importance. In this article, names of persons are given with first name first, Western style.

—R. E. K.

I In 1994 Ben and Thanh Cherry, teachers at the Bowral Waldorf School in Australia, visited China. During their travels, they met and spoke with many people about Waldorf Education. On the veranda



of a teahouse in the city of Chengdu, in southwest China, they spoke with a young couple, Harry Wong and his wife, Li Zhang. That conversation was the seed of Waldorf Education planted in China. It inspired Harry and Li to go to England and then America to study Waldorf Education. Ten years later, they established the first Waldorf school in the Middle Kingdom.

The Chengdu Waldorf School opened its doors in September 2004 and is now completing its second year of operation. It is located in a former resort hotel about seven miles outside of Chengdu. The school has a kindergarten with about twenty children—and a waiting list—and two combined classes (first/second and fourth/fifth grades) with a total of eight children. A number of families have moved to Chengdu in order to enroll their children in the school. The school recently was awarded official status as a nonprofit organization. Harry Wong is the administrator of the school.



Li Zhang is the head kindergarten teacher, having done her training at Sunbridge College in Chestnut Ridge, New York. She has two full-time assistants who are teachers-in-training, and three helpers. One of the helpers, mother of a three-year-old girl, left her job as a college teacher to study Waldorf Education. The staff devotes much effort to finding and using suitable songs, games, arts, and crafts from traditional Chinese culture and in celebrating the traditional festivals. The kindergarten day is long, going from 8:30 AM until 5:00 PM.

Most of the children in the kindergarten come from relatively well-to-do and sophisticated families in Chengdu. Like urban children all over China, many have been affected by premature intellectual work, poor nutrition, overscheduling, too much exposure to television and the media, and a lack of rhythm in their home lives. Also, because of the “one child” policy in China, many children have two (doting) parents plus four (doting) grandparents. They have therefore an excess of attention and a lack of boundaries. Many children in China have serious problems in school, even in kindergarten, and the Chengdu school has already acquired a reputation for accepting and being able to deal with difficult children.

Educating the parents about Waldorf Education and creating a relationship of trust between parents and the school has been a slow process. The parents are very anxious about their children. Some call the kindergarten every day, wanting to know each detail of what is going on there. They ask questions such as: What was served at snack time? Did my child wash his hands before eating? Was he able to nap? Parents even designed a daily questionnaire for teachers to fill out. The school now is offering parenting workshops for parents and grandparents.

Most of the children in the grades classes are children of teachers and of teachers-in-training who live at the school. These parents are taking a big step out of mainstream Chinese culture. While China has adopted a free economic system, political and cultural life are still strictly controlled by the state. Almost all schools are government schools. The education system is based on a materialistic view of the human being and stresses early and intense academics, regimentation, competition, and standardized testing.

The teacher of the first/second grade class is Hon Yu Li, a teacher-in-training who has apprenticed at a school in California. Zewu Li, who trained at Emerson College in England, is the teacher of the fifth/sixth



grade class. Both work hard to adapt Waldorf Education to Chinese culture. All the children in the grades classes at Chengdu and their teachers can fit into the school minivan. This allows for frequent trips to enrich main lesson blocks on such themes as local history, local geography, botany, and zoology.

For example, the classes made several trips to Du Jiang Yuan, a flood control and irrigation dam near Chengdu, built in 300 BC and still in operation today. The children studied poems, stories, and legends about the dam and made clay models and paintings of it. They also studied legends about the beloved ancient King Wangdi, who gave up his crown to the person who was able to control the floods. After Wangdi's death, he returned as a cuckoo to remind the people when to sow and harvest their crops.

In addition to the school's two large rooms, thirty-five small guest rooms, and courtyard, there is a garden and some adjoining farmland. The garden and farmland are being cultivated using the biodynamic techniques developed by Rudolf Steiner. The land is being treated with biodynamic preparations and fertilized with biodynamically prepared compost and is beginning to produce vegetables for the school.

Chengdu Waldorf School is not only kindergarten and grade school; it is also a center for adult education. The school has hosted many workshops on Waldorf Education, Anthroposophy, and related topics, some featuring experts from abroad. In May 2005, it sponsored the first public course on biodynamic agriculture, taught by a BD farmer from India. Also, the school has sponsored courses in Waldorf Education, eurythmy, and biodynamic farming in other parts of the country. The courses, both in Chengdu and elsewhere, usually attract about sixty persons and typically include artistic work and singing. Participants often are deeply touched by their experiences and say that their lives have been changed.

About fifteen young people from all over China live at the school and take part in its life. These co-workers work on the property, beautifying it and making it more suitable for use by the school community, serve as assistants in the classroom, and help organize and participate in festivals and special events. They join in the various workshops and studies, and some are translating books on Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy into Chinese.

The co-workers have an opportunity to look back on their own schooling. They are experiencing an education based on a view of the human being as a being of soul and spirit as well as body. Many find this a healing and transforming experience that is inspiring them to bring others in China an education that develops the whole human being. This year, volunteer helpers from Germany and France have joined the school community.

Recently, seeds planted in other parts of China have begun to sprout. Tammy Hughes, who taught at the Chengdu school during its first year, is now teaching at High Gate House School, a Waldorf kindergarten in Hong Kong. In the city of Zhuhai, a large day care center is adopting Waldorf methods and has a Waldorf kindergarten with sixteen children. There are Waldorf playgroups in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. In Beijing, Wu Bei, a former university teacher of physics and a graduate of the foundation year at Emerson College, working with a group of parents, has set up a Waldorf kindergarten. Because of space restrictions in the capital, the kindergarten is located in a flat in an apartment building but, nevertheless, seems to function very well. Teachers from Chengdu have given workshops in these areas, and





the Chengdu school, with help from the West, is creating an in-service training program.

Like most Waldorf schools around the world, the Chengdu school faces financial challenges. Only a modest tuition can be charged. Thus teachers' salaries are low, even by Chinese standards. The renovation and improvement of the school building has gone slowly. In the first year, a leaking roof, a sporadic supply of hot water, and other challenges were part of daily life. Fortunately, the school has received much help from friends and supporters abroad. This made the founding of the school possible and also allowed foreign mentors to visit and teachers to continue their training abroad. Now the school needs a substantial deposit in order to officially register with the government as a grade school. Also, the school hopes to purchase a permanent home.



In the summer of 2005, the Chengdu school in conjunction with the Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners ("Friends of Waldorf Education")—an organization based in Germany dedicated to helping Waldorf initiatives around the world—hosted a weeklong workshop on Waldorf Education. The focus was on the three soul activities of thinking, feeling, and willing. Ben Cherry gave the morning lectures and clearly presented the spiritual view of the world and of the human being that is the foundation of Waldorf Education. There were, in addition, workshops in handwork, clay modeling, painting, and eurythmy. The seventy participants—parents, teachers, and directors of schools—were eager to learn and to deal with the pressing questions that confront

them: How can education in China be improved? What exactly is Waldorf Education? How can Waldorf Education fit in with Chinese culture? Can it work alongside Montessori education? Will Waldorf Education prepare children for exams?

On the last day, as the participants began to leave and return to their homes, it was palpable that new ideas were finding their way from Chengdu to many parts of China. There is a proverb in the Orient: "From one seed come ten thousand seeds."



Those wishing to learn more about the Chengdu Waldorf School and Waldorf Education in China can visit the Web site: www.waldorfchina.org

The school is very interested in creating exchange relationships with students, teachers, and schools around the world. Please contact Harry Wong at waldorfd@126.com

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Those wishing to contribute to the Chengdu school can contact:

Rudolf Steiner Foundation
PO Box 29915, San Francisco, CA 94129
415-561-3900 • www.rsfoundation.org
Checks should be earmarked "Freunde/Chengdu."



CREDITS: *Photos in this article are of children at the Chengdu Waldorf School, Chengdu, China.*